DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 109 672 CS 202 147

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TITLE Learning to Teach Writing, Writing to Learn Teaching.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 PLUS POSTAGE. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Descriptive Writing; Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

There is a logical sequence in the steps of a freshman English course, the goal of which is the comprehension of the writing process and a readiness to move forward with that process. Students must first learn prewriting--an outpouring on paper of every thought connected with a given topic. This is followed by selecting ideas, formulating a thesis, establishing a writing pattern, and editing. The two final stages are preparing the manuscript and proofreading. Teachers can best learn how to teach writing by trying these processes in their own writing. (JM)

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LEARNING TO TEACH WRITING, WRITING TO LEARN TEACHING

Aline Wolff

If the grade curve, the bell-shaped indicator of a mediocre middle balanced by A-students and failures, is abandoned -- what then? My first experience with this was in my sophomore year in college, when an economics professor gave 75% of his class D's and F's, and I was part of that 75%. "But it's not fair," we complained. "Too many of you have not learned the material," the professor replied.

In that moment I learned never to trust the grade curve again. I had always manipulated it to my advantage before, maintaining my position in the scholastic elite. But now somewhere, I knew that my position depended on someone else being in a lower position. My success meant that someone else failed. Or, as Jules Henry says, "...somebody's success has been bought at the cost of our failure. This is the standard condition of the American (elementary) school... To a Zuni, Hopi, or Dakota Indian (this) ... would seem cruel beyond belief...a form of torture..."

(Culture Against Man, p. 296)

To abandon the straightjacket of the grade curve is liberating, an exhilirating aspect of the strategy of Mastery Learning. When the concept of "those who fail and those who pass" is abandoned, failure is no longer a requirement of education. Then, in any given semester, in any given classroom, every student, excepting those who are dedicated to not learning, will be engaged

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in acquiring skills--learning new behaviors--making progress. And that seems to be the whole point of going to school.

Today, at this conference, the behavior in question is writing, and the problem at hand is the mastery of that behavior. In my work for the past few years teaching students on all ability levels -- open admissions, adult education, municipal workers, professionals in all fields, and just regular kids -- I have explored how this behavior is to be learned. Expressing my findings in the language of mastery learning, I have found that there are discrete skills to be learned in writing, and these composition skills are clearly sequential. "Corrective learning experiences" like small group experience, peer tutoring, and teacher conferences are a vital part of learning a new behavior, which must occur as part of the initial learning process. They should not be relegated to the position of corrective or punitive procedures, employed only when the student does not learn through other means. If these points are accepted, then three questions are immediately raised:

1) how is the sequence derived?

2) at what pace does it proceed?

3) how are the corrective learning experiences arranged?

To answer these questions, teachers must examine their own writing, and their own process of writing. We must learn as much as possible about our own skills, our own sequence of development, our own problems in the area we are teaching.

For example, ask yourself what happens when you sit down to write a memo to the dean, a professional journal article, a review. What are your reactions? How do you engage -- and disengage -- in the writing process? Is you experience in writing different types of papers varied? For example, are you quicker to sit down and write a brief letter to the editor of the school paper at your office desk than you are to tackle that last chapter of your dissertation? What feels different? Why?

In short, find out as much as you can about your own process of writing. Try to outline the steps you go through, the mental operations as well as what's on paper. By doing this myself, I have derived from my own writing, a sequence of writing behaviors needed for freshman composition. Thus, writing to learn teaching. I'd like to introduce these sequential steps of freshman composition and mention, in passing, some of the teaching strategies used for mastery.

Let me make it clear that I am presenting steps in a sequence, and that I consider the sequence extremely logical. However, these steps are not designed to be seen as separate entities to be learned and conquered like French verbs. Rather, they must be learned as part of an on-going process, and it must be clear to students that mastery of these steps does not lead to a finite end point. The goal of freshman composition, even though it is usually tested as a performance on an essay exam, is rather the comprehension of at least a part of the writing process, and the readiness to move forward with that process.

The first writing behavior that students need to learn is prewriting. This behavior can be defined as the ability to write unhaltingly, prolifically, profusely in response to a topic, assignment, or stimulus. Prewriting is the first response to an assignment: an outpouring of every thought onto paper, random as well as focussed, wise as well as foolish. This step is an incredibly difficult one for the majority of students who are accustomed to dropping only the barest pellets of words onto paper, because they have not experienced writing through the garbage to the perceptions. It is a common experience for a teacher to receive one of these pellet-papers from a student. Then, in conference, talking to the student about the paper topic, you find vivid details, engaging perceptions, and sometimes, brilliant insights. It's in there, all right, but students have never experienced the effort of trying to get it all out uncritically. They need to prewrite to find out what questions they may want to answer, what information they have, what directions they want to explore, what they believe, what they know.

I have taught students about prewriting by doing it myself-- by writing and verbalizing a process that used to be internal. I work with any composition topic, and then put up on the board everything that comes to my mind and much that comes to my students' minds. This can be the first exposure for many students to the concept that they can say and write everything in their heads. And I have been asked, by my classes, to repeat this day after day for as much as two weeks. They're not bored; they are as interested as a baby learning to

put a peg into a hole, or a beginning guitar player learning the first chords. It's a new behavior, and students need time to explore it and play with it. Their exploration is started off by examining my prewriting process, but they need to work with each other producing prewriting in groups of three and four, pooling resources to accumulate written data.

Prewriting is like the infant's crawling stage that must precede walking: an opportunity to accumulate a great deal of experience safely before trying out more difficult behavior. Selecting is the next sequential step. Here, students review their prewriting notes and pick out the fragments and ideas that are provocative, interesting, fruitful, connected to the assignment...whatever they have a response to. Again, this is a new behavior and needs time to be integrated. I have found it exciting and helpful at this stage to give students lists of prewriting from other classes, other students, or my own writing and asked them to select whatever interests them, to classify which items belong together. This can be done first in small groups where they can talk over the process, and later individually, using their own writing.

Formulating a thesis, the next step, is predicated on the selecting process. Students look at what they have been attracted to, and try to describe something: a principle holding the narratives or ideas or memories together, a reaction common to several of the notes, a way of describing their selections in a sentence or two. This again may be a new behavior for the majority of your class, and they can use time here to experiment with this stage and work on all

the previous stages. It is crucial for the teacher to be writing with the students in the classroom on every assignment at this point because all these writing behaviours are stumbling blocks for students. For English teachers, these writing behaviors are on an almost unconscious level that must be raised to consciousness so that teachers can feel where their students stumble, freeze, need to experience the process again. It would not be unreasonable, with a remedial class or a group of students starting college after years of absence from school, to spend an entire freshman composition semester just on these initial parts of the process, up to formulating a thesis.

The next step requires students to plug in a writing pattern, an organizational device to hold the writing together. The most basic pattern is the topic sentence/supporting details, Christensen's top sentence paragraph. There is nothing intuitive about this pattern; it is an intellectual device and needs to be worked into the entire process rather than taught in the isolation of "using topic sentences," or "writing unified paragraphs." This type of paragraph is also the base upon which other, more complex forms are constructed. This means that the basic, top sentence paragraph must be mastered before the student can learn the patterns of, for example, inductive paragraphs, paragraphs of definition or classification, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and so on.

All the behaviours described so far are part of the process of writing the first draft of a simple paragraph or short paper, and there are more before that paper can be considered complete. The next stage is that of editing, the rereading and revising process that begins only when a writer holds his first draft in hand. In terms of the sequence of a semester, there is no point in talking about editing until students are comfortable doing large amounts of prewriting. Editing is a stopping and evaluative process which contradicts the prewriting that must flow on without evaluation. This does not mean that grammar must be held in reserve until the end of the semester; rather, grammar can be taught from the beginning but not as part of the writing process.

The two final stages of the sequence of writing behaviors for freshman composition are manuscript preparation and proofreading. Of these, proofreading in particular is another stumbling block skill; the most common student behaviour is simply to turn over completed papers as soon as the ink is dry. The various tricks of proofreading: silent reading, reading out loud to a friend, and the careful and pleasurable perusal of your own writing are not known to many of our students.

Because they do not know all these behaviours as part of the complex process of writing, students are focussed on completing a product which they neither evaluate nor enjoy. The pleasures of the writing process - thinking,

judging, perceiving -- are lost to them. If the pleasures exist for us as English teachers, we must pass on the pleasures of mastery to our students. And it is necessary to write to know the pleasures and the pains of writing.

The analysis of your own writing process will heighten your awareness of the sequence that students must learn. Continuing to write in class with your students will give you the pace at which they are moving. It is crucial for teachers to learn (by contrasting their own writing with their students' writing) the speed with which students are learning the new writing behaviours. By writing assignments in class with students, teachers can see the points where students freeze up while the teacher flows along. A freeze means that a writing behavior hasn't been mastered, and that the class as a whole may need to remain working on that behavior for some time. The pacing will vary from student to student, from class to class. It is vital, however, that yourown sequence for producing writing be understood and available to you so that you can slow it down for your students; make it visible not only to yourself, but more importantly, to them.

Our objective in teaching freshman composition is to teach these new writing behaviors as part of the larger process of writing, but it is also more. This class is where we must allow students to learn that thinking is a part of writing, and that the entire process is a pleasurable one. To teach this, teachers must learn it for themselves through their own writing.